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Try to prove me wrong: Dialogicity and audience involvement in economics blogs

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1. Introduction

While early studies on web discourse focused on the hybridization of spoken and written discourse (e.g. Ferrara et al., 1991; Crystal, 2001; Boardmann, 2005), more recent work centres on the extended participatory framework of the World Wide Web (Garzone et al., 2007; Herring et al., 2013; Yus, 2011). The Web is increasingly becoming the site where expert knowledge is exchanged and disseminated through websites, blogs, open source materials etc. The use of English as the language of science has greatly extended its potentialities in the context of the Web, while facing the challenges of intercultural communication (Plo Alastrué and Pérez Llantada, 2015). The Internet is changing the circulation of scientific knowledge and access to scientific conversations (Buehl, 2015). How far this is actually affecting language use and rhetorical and communicative practices in specialized discourse still needs to be assessed.

The present paper presents an empirical corpus-informed study of an emerging communicative environment – academic blogs – in a specific area of academic expertise, i.e. economics. Based on the assumption that discourse communities have their preferred forms of communication, it is important to analyse the effects of the technological affordances on language use in specific contexts, assessing these effects within the system of genres that characterizes the specific community. Economists have traditionally communicated with peers through research articles and with the wider audience through the media. The new social media (blogging in particular) can be seen as sites for both the co-construction of research and the dissemination of results or theories, addressing both colleagues and the wider audience. This would make them a new form of academic public engagement, not only distinct from academic publications but also from traditional forms of media discourse. But what kind of dialogue do blogs establish? An empirical analysis of how dialogue is set up in economic blogs might contribute to an exploration of these wider questions.

The outline of the paper is as follows. Section 2 introduces the theoretical framework, some literature review and the actual research questions tackled in this paper. The next Section 3 introduces the methodological framework of the study: the materials used and the analytical procedures adopted. Section 4 develops first a comparison between news columns and blog posts: word

forms with significantly divergent frequency are interpreted in relation to the intertextuality of blogs and their participatory nature. Section 5 studies the structure of the blog thread, centering on how comments relate to posts or to other comments. Conclusions sum up the features of economics blogs observed in this study.

2. Academic bloggers: focus on economics

Blogs – personal, regularly updated web spaces with posts linked to relevant material and open to readers' comments (e.g. Myers, 2010: 2–7) – seem to have had significant impact on academic communities, both in the way scholars communicate with peers and in the dissemination of knowledge to the lay public. Besides blogs written by journalists or professional bloggers, there are blogs kept by active researchers, who are thus developing new forms of writing. The format of the blog provides an open space where a diverse audience (with different degrees of expertise) may have access to scientific information intended both for non-specialist readers and for experts (Luzón, 2013a). The aim is to inform, but also to take position on controversial issues and to stir and steer public debate.

Blogs are used by scholars as a tool for disseminating information but also for identity and relationship management (Schmidt, 2007) and for increasing the blogger's visibility and reputation (Luzón, 2011: 518–519). Dissemination involves strategies of recontextualization, i.e. adjusting information to the readers' knowledge and information needs, but also deploying linguistic features typical of personal, informal, and dialogic interaction to create intimacy and proximity, engaging in critical analysis of the recontextualized research and focusing on its relevance, and using explicit and personal expressions of evaluation (Luzón, 2012). Through careful use of evaluative resources, scholars construct their authority and expertise, they enhance their visibility and they construct their identity as members of a disciplinary group (Luzón, 2012: 162).

Blogs are also the site where research is developed as well as disseminated: “research blogs enable scientists to engage with their academic and other communities, present and discuss their work in progress, and receive feedback from their peers [...]: both scholarly audience and the general public can read these blogs and contribute to the discussion” (Kuteeva, 2016: 432). Research blogs have thus also been shown to introduce new collaborative practices in academic discourse, as “unknown, heterogeneous, and

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varied audiences may participate in co-constructing research debates” (Mauranen, 2013: 30–31).

It is most probably this diversity of audiences afforded by the Web that distinguishes blogs from their antecedent/ancestral genre. Whether we think this is to be found in journals and diaries, in filtering and directory services (collecting and organizing information) and in commentaries (pamphlet/editorial/opinion-comment) (as Miller and Shephard, 2004) or rather we think that an important antecedent may be the conference presentation followed by discussion (Mauranen, 2013:18), we will acknowledge that the web has introduced an important interactive dimension, often leading to interesting patterns of agreement and disagreement (Bolander, 2012), or even to open conflict (Luzón, 2013b).

The extended participatory framework of the web provides increased possibilities for collaborative research, for interaction and feedback, but there is also less control on the audience that gets actually involved. The discourse community is defined by the participants in blogging practice and may involve both experts and lay spectators or commenters. If it is true that “the genre regulating, pre-existing community does not apply to web-based genres (Mauranen, 2013: 30), it is also true that the new practice can involve scholars in parallel conversations with different types of interlocutors belonging to the “community of blogging practice” (Schmidt, 2007). The difference between scholarly communication and public communication is less marked (if not collapsed). The community may include both the academic and the general public.

Puschmann (2013: 87–101) highlights a range of language and discourse features that become pragmatically relevant in the study of blogs. Starting from deixis, i. e. contextual reference to a deictic centre, defined in time and person (even if probably less defined in space), he mentions addressivity and audience design, i.e. “the way bloggers integrate their conceptualization of the readership into their style”, relative freedom from politeness minimizing face-threatening acts, and different stylistic approaches of bloggers (author-centric vs topic-centric blogging, one more prone to narration/stream of consciousness and the other to exposition and argumentation).

Yus (2015) focuses specifically on the alterations that the internet may have brought about in the interpersonal dimension of academic discourse because of the changes in the relation between authors and readers. He looks at different types of academic texts along a cline of those that are simply reproduced on the Net, those that are adapted to the link-mediated quality of online texts, and ‘native’ documents (created on a website) such as blogs. His study outlines the specificity of the online environment: the difficulty of predicting ideal readers, the need to establish room for negotiations and predictions, the reader’s possibility to comment on the article and engage in conversations with the writers, ultimately the unpredictability of readers’ interpretations, interests and background knowledge. As the text moves into a ‘digitally native’ quality, common-ground markers are shown to decrease, whereas similes, boosters and use of direct addresses to the audience increase.

The evaluatively charged nature of blogs (Baron, 2008; Herring et al., 2004) has made them ideal for an analysis of the language of evaluation (Bondi and Seidenari, 2012; Bondi and Diani, 2015; Luzón, 2013a,b), but also for studies on writer’s stance, reader’s engagement and identity construction (cf. Gil-Salom and Soler-Monreal, 2014). The study of dialogic features of language has also been central in studies on academic discourse (e.g. Hyland, 2005), especially in relation to the notion of voice (Hyland and Sancho Guinda, 2012). This involves forms of self-mention (Hyland, 2002), reader’s engagement and interpersonal metadiscourse in general (Hyland, 2005), as well as on the language of *-evaluation (Hunston, 2000, 2011; Mauranen and Bondi, 2003; Biber, 2006). Stance taking thus becomes a key element in the writer’s voice, not only as individual but also from a cultural,

domain-related, and genre-related standpoint. It is certainly equally important in research genres and in forms of public communication, such as blogs managed by academics.

The study presented here has chosen the specific domain of economics, a discipline that clearly crosses many boundaries: not only is it both “hard” (based on statistic and mathematical modeling) and “soft” (based on qualitative research), it also often crosses the border between media and academic discourse, because of its obvious relevance to public affairs and everyday life. Economics blogs attract the whole range of potential audiences: different degrees of expertise as well as different schools of thought. Economists have long engaged in various forms of knowledge dissemination but arguably blogs are “the most important new outlet for economists” (Quiggin, 2011: 437), as they contribute to increasing dissemination of economic research and theoretical approaches, thus improving researchers’ impact.

Many academic economists manage a blog, while they also produce research publications and columns for the news. Of course the domain of economics attracts the interest of many different profiles of bloggers: professionals, institutions and the media often manage very successful blogs. Academic bloggers, however, appear to be a very active group, and in many contexts also the most influential: Analytica, for example, ranks the top 200 most influential economics blogs using an “impact factor” system to rate their influence¹ and lists four American professors of economics among the top five.

Keeping in mind the three types of blogs identified by Walker (2006) as originating “from inside the ivory tower” – platforms for public debate, research logs and blogs about academic life – our interest here lies in the first two, those that would be classified as thematic in the largely accepted distinction between personal and thematic blogs proposed by Krishnamurthy (2002). The main topic is not the blogger’s personal or academic life, but rather the blogger’s views on economic issues (whether theoretical or applied) belonging to any of the possible sub-domains of economic studies. When dealing with established academics, authorial voice is inevitably important. Academic economists on blogs surely share in the “personal and conversational style” that Grieve et al. (2010:321) identify as “the standard blog voice”, but their influential work remains the one that Grieve et al. would classify as the more personal and addressee-focused “commentary blog type” or – to a limited extent – the more impersonal and informational “expert blog type” (2010:19–20).

On the other hand, it would be possible to say that economics blogs may not always be research blogs in the sense of Kuteeva (2016: 436), where she claims that “although research blogs are meant to address a broader range of audiences and combine features of both written and spoken discourse, their discourse is determined primarily by research contexts”. If this is certainly true of the academic blogger, the same cannot be said for the other participants, who might be more interested in current affairs and economic policy. In the case of economics, moreover policy relevance cannot be ignored. Questions of policy (and especially macro-economic policy) probably represent the key factor determining the interest of many economists for blogging: in the words of Quiggin (2011: 437) “blogs provide a way for academic economists to re-enter a public debate from which they have largely been excluded”. Economic theory and economic policy are closely related and we could even say that economic blogging has constituted an attempt to bring policy relevance back to the centre of theoretical concerns.

The close link of economic thought with matters of policy and politics at large highlights their potential close relationship to cur-

¹ <http://www.analytica.com/blog/posts/top-200-most-influential-economics-blogs/1>.

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